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Mr. Lincoln goes to the theatre

LINCOLN ROOM

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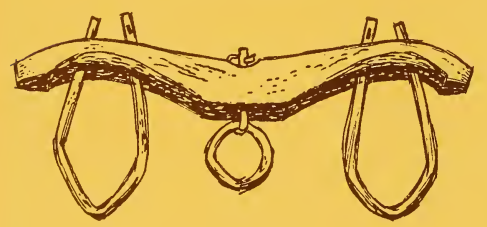

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MR. LINCOLN GOES TO THE THEATRE

ART HEMMINGER

Bruce Wilshaw

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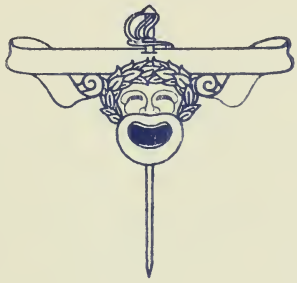

ART HEMMINGER

from the
JOURNAL *of the* ILLINOIS STATE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CHICAGO
The Poor Richard Press
1941

973.7L63
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Lincoln Room

MR. LINCOLN GOES TO THE THEATRE

ABRAHAM Lincoln's predilection for the bright make-believe of the theatre is a facet of his character worthy of far more than the passing notice it has attracted to date. Contemporary correspondence and comments indicate that Lincoln was not only hopelessly stage-struck but that he relied almost exclusively upon the footlights for escape from the realities of an existence which offered few completely happy moments.

As a young man, Lincoln was so intrigued by theatrical performances that Judge David Davis and others frequently took him to task for his penchant, which they considered an indication of sloth, sinfulness, "peculiarity," or all three combined. Lincoln listened gravely to their admonitions but continued to frequent concert halls, theatres and "academies" on every possible occasion. He was not discouraged, even, when circuit-riding companions "joshed" him because of a close friendship he had formed with the leading lady of an itinerant theatrical company.

Lincoln Financial Museum

The banter of Lincoln's fellow-attorneys was occasioned by his admiration for Mrs. Lois Hillis, of a group known as the Newhall Players who strolled in Illinois, Indiana and Michigan during the early and middle 1800's. Lincoln ordinarily preferred attending

entertainments alone, sitting in a far corner where he could follow the performance without distraction, but when Mrs. Hillis was on the bill he took a front seat and made no effort to conceal his bedazzlement.

He once told Judge Davis, "Mrs. Hillis is the only woman, besides my wife, who ever appreciated me enough to pay me a compliment," and the doughty jurist—with a sidelong glance at his protégé's gaunt frame and weather-beaten face—snorted, "Lord, Mr. Lincoln, I thought you was a universal favorite with the fair sex!"

Like many stage folks of the period (or today, for that matter) Mrs. Hillis published her reminiscences. An interesting passage in this otherwise commonplace document tells of an evening in a Springfield hotel, when Lincoln, goaded by his associates into performing, recited with tremendous effect the poem "Mortality," containing the line, "Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" Later, he told Mrs. Hillis that he knew neither the author of the poem nor its name, but that he would be "proud to copy it off for her." He then retired to his room, laboriously transcribed the verses and presented them to the actress the following morning. Since the Newhall Players were going on the road that day, Lincoln and Mrs. Hillis bade each other elaborate farewells. They did not meet again.

One of young Mr. Lincoln's early theatrical thrills must have occurred in 1839, soon after he had set up in law practice in Springfield. It was the winter when the elder Joseph Jefferson presented for the first time in Illinois John Howard Payne's play, "Clari, the Maid of Milan," and Lincoln was surely in the audience when Mrs. Jefferson sang the song hit of the show, "Home,

Sweet Home."

Joseph Jefferson, III, later famous for his "Rip Van Winkle," was a member of the company. He relates in his autobiography that his father, having made money for several weeks after his arrival in Springfield, decided to cash in on the town's prosperity as the newly-created capital of Illinois by building a theatre on a rented downtown lot. In the theatre, which the younger Jefferson described as a "ninety-foot dry goods box with a roof," benches were used in lieu of folding opera chairs, sperm-oil lamps which smelled to Heaven illuminated the auditorium, and footlights were composed of smaller lamps set in a float which operated on counterweights. Jefferson comments that if this "devil's workshop" were suddenly to have been lighted up as brightly as a metropolitan theatre of the time, its enemies would have declared that the light was furnished "direct from Satan's private gasometer."

In the midst of the Jeffersons' rising fortunes a heavy blow fell. A religious revival was in progress and the fathers of the church, not content with launching diatribes against the stage, actually prevailed upon the town council to draft an ordinance placing a prohibitory license fee upon theatres. The measure would have doomed the Jeffersons' venture to an early death, had not Lincoln, newly-elected to the council and spurred by his itch for footlight fare, offered to oppose the licensing measure for them. When the ordinance was brought up for a vote Lincoln rose to the floor and diffidently began his speech of opposition. As he warmed up to his subject, his voice became less harsh, his gestures smoother and his manner more convincing. Lincoln traced the history of the theatre from the time

when Thespis acted in a cart to the present day. He quoted Shakespeare, cracked sly jokes and illustrated his points with anecdotes. In the end, he prevailed and the tax was repealed.

There is little doubt that he was among those who held "paper" on the Jefferson theatre during the season that followed. Some of the plays presented that winter were Payne's "Therese, the Orphan of Geneva," George Boker's "Francesca de Rimini" and "Calaynos," Paulding's "The Lion of the West," and Bret's "Metamore," which gave rise to a whole series of Indian plays, among them "Sassacus, or the Indian Wife," "Kairrissah," "Oraloosa," "Outlassie," "The Wigwam," "The Indian Prophecy," etc. The Indian melodramas eventually became so much of a plague that newspapers and periodicals began bitterly denouncing them as complete nuisances. It was not until 1855, however, when John Brougham came out with his extravagant burlesque, "Pocahontas," that this wild and woolly cycle received its final coup de grace.

Lincoln's fondness for negro minstrelsy is brought out in a letter from Henry C. Whitney, a circuit-riding companion, to Herndon's amanuensis, Jesse Weik. Whitney tells of being in Chicago with Lincoln two months before the 1860 convention. Having been given three tickets to Rumsey and Newcomb's Minstrels, he hunted up Lincoln and asked him if he would like to go to a "nigger show" that night. Lincoln exclaimed: "Of all things I would rather do to-night that certainly is one." Whitney wrote of that evening:

> I never saw him enjoy himself more than he did that night. He applauded as often as anybody and with greater animation. The nondescript song and dance of "Dixie" was sung and acted by the

troupe, the first time I ever saw it, and probably the first time it was sung and acted in Illinois. I can remember well the spontaneity of Lincoln's enthusiasm and the heartiness of his applause at the music and action of this rollicking and anomalous performance. Little did we think that this weird and harmless melody would erelong be transformed into a fierce battle-cry by whose inspiration slaughter and carnage would be carried into the ranks of those who bared their bosoms to save the nation's life. Little did we think of this as he clapped his great brawny hands in true rustic heartiness and exclaimed in riotous enthusiasm: "Let's have it again! Let's have it again!"

Whitney also recalled a night in Danville in 1854 when Lincoln, mysteriously absent for hours, came in at midnight to wake him and Judge Davis with an account of an entertainment where he had just seen a magic lantern by which "wonderful sights and transformations" were shown. Lincoln, Whitney related, described "all the features of that primitive show with as much zest and enthusiasm as a schoolboy." The next night he returned to witness "an entire change of programme."

Further evidence of Lincoln's fondness for visits to Chicago theatres occurs in the diary of Orville Hickman Browning, Whig politician and friend of Lincoln's, whose rather prosy comments touching great lives and events have been preserved in print by the Illinois State Historical Library. Under date of July 7, 1857, we find that Browning, newly-arrived in Chicago from Quincy, spent his first night in the metropolis attending a performance of "Paul Pry," starring William Evans Burton, the English comedian-playwright who was then making one of his infrequent middlewestern appearances. Lincoln arrived in Chicago the next day and went with Browning to see Burton play "Toodles," a role of his own invention, which both of them concluded

was excellent. "His acting is very fine," Browning wrote. "It does not appear like *acting* at all. He is much the finest comedian I have ever seen." The two returned to Burton's playhouse on July 13, and saw a dramatization of "Dombey and Son," with Burton in the character of Captain Cuttle. The play must have been somewhat less successful than the first two, at least from Browning's viewpoint. He continued to praise Burton, but concluded that "the others were hum drum."

Weik recounts Herndon's story of the occasion when he and Lincoln, on their way home from the office one night, dropped in on a church society entertainment. Among other things on the program they heard for the first time the story of "Miss Flora McFlimsy with Nothing to Wear," "rendered" (in Herndon's words) by an elocutionist. In a place near the middle, not intended to be especially humorous, the audience was startled by a loud guffaw. Something in the poem had struck Lincoln's funny-bone and, despite his surroundings, he had given way to a fit of uncontrollable, gargantuan laughter.

The spell of the footlights followed Lincoln to Washington. Even during the bitter war years he liked to go forth on foot, accompanied only by a friend, to visit some playhouse which had received notice of his coming just a few moments before. His secretaries upbraided him for the risk involved in these visits, but Noah Brooks who frequently accompanied him said that their very unexpectedness served as a safeguard. It was the fact that his plans to attend "Our American Cousin" were so widely advertised that made possible the plot for his assassination.

Toward the last, as Lincoln's taste became more

sedate, his theatre-going was usually confined to occasions when Shakespearean repertory was billed, but Brooks recalls a hilarious evening at the old Washington theatre, where they saw Mrs. John Wood in "Pocahontas." Several weeks afterward Lincoln could still be observed chuckling to himself over the recollection of lines from the play. On the occasion when Brooks and Lincoln saw Edwin Forrest in "King Lear," Lincoln appeared more impressed by the acting of John McCullough, in the role of Edgar, than with the great tragedian's appearance as the mad king. He asked that McCullough might come to the box between the acts, and when the young actor was brought to the door, clad in his fantastic garb of rags and straw, Lincoln warmly but diffidently praised his performance.

James H. Hackett, the actor-manager, was another Lincoln favorite of the war years. A series of letters passed between the two beginning in 1863 when Lincoln acknowledged the receipt of a copy of Hackett's book, *Notes and Comments upon Plays and Actors of Shakespeare*. In his first note, containing an invitation to the White House, the President praised Hackett's interpretation of Falstaff which he had witnessed several months before, and deprecated his own knowledge of the theatre. "For one of my age," he wrote, "I have seen very little of the drama." Lincoln's statement may or may not have been a contradiction of fact, depending on the construction given the word "drama." If it is held to include minstrels, concerts, burlesques and the mixed grill provided in Springfield and Chicago, one must conclude that Lincoln was guilty of understatement.

In the same letter, the President professed his ad-

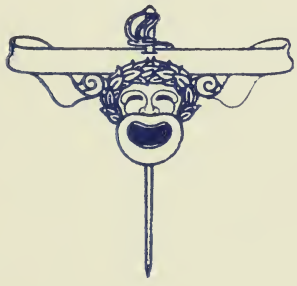
miration for " 'Lear,' 'Richard III,' 'Henry VIII,' 'Hamlet,' and especially 'Macbeth.' I think nothing equals 'Macbeth.' It is wonderful!" was his expression. He set forth the unorthodox opinion that "the soliloquy in 'Hamlet' commencing 'Oh, my offense is rank,' surpasses that commencing 'To be or not to be,' " and further inflated Hackett's already sufficiently-developed ego by closing with: "I should like to hear you pronounce the opening speech of Richard III."

Several other letters passed between the President and the actor, including one which indicates that some of Lincoln's commendatory remarks must have found their way into print. Only Lincoln's half of the correspondence is preserved, however, and as a result the incident defies complete interpretation. At any rate, Lincoln exonerated Hackett from any blame in the matter, and passed if off as one of the many trials besetting the life of a public servant. Hackett, who somehow failed to set down his memoirs, according to his contemporaries, was a "fine-looking man," and a capable, though somewhat uninspired actor. Joseph Jefferson declared that he remained an amateur all his life, but William Winter, less likely to be prejudiced, said his Falstaff was the greatest in the annals of the American theatre and that his acting was on "an intellectual plane far above the current standards of the time."

That Lincoln's death occurred in a theatre occasioned no little consternation among the clergymen who took it upon themselves to interpret the tragedy to the nation. Most of them hated the stage thoroughly and attempted to explain away the circumstance of the assassination's taking place in a citadel of scarlet temptation

and carnal license by saying that Lincoln was forced to attend by public demand and expectation. Some, however, went so far as to declare that Lincoln, stepping into a theatre, had removed himself from God's jurisdiction and by his act had forfeited Divine protection.

Today, all this furore seems far-fetched. Still, the student seeking further clues to the qualities which made Lincoln a great leader would do well to study thoroughly the bond between his theatre-going and his public life. Surely, his sense of the dramatic, his ability as a mimic, and his great flair for story-telling stemmed in no small measure from his deep-seated attachment for the theatre and its trappings.



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